



TDCJ handles Hurricane Harvey with readiness, response, recovery

Before it began, the 2017 Atlantic hurricane season was predicted to be average, likely to produce only three major hurricanes. But it's important to remember that even a single storm, depending on its strength and where it makes landfall, can make for a busy season.

That storm struck in late August.

Like no other event in TDCJ history, Hurricane Harvey tested the agency's ability to fulfill its mission while enduring a catastrophic and widespread weather emergency. TDCJ staff responded to this unprecedented storm event, perhaps the greatest logistical challenge in the history of Texas corrections, with practiced skill and professional expertise.

By the time it dissipated, Harvey had left a trail of destruction along the Texas Gulf Coast that extended miles inland. Hurricane winds and flooding rains struck densely populated, low-lying areas from Beaumont to Corpus Christi, including Houston, the fourth most-populous city in the nation and home to 2.3 million people. In four days, parts of East Texas received more than 40 inches of rain, and accumulations of almost 65 inches – nearly 5.5 feet – of rain along the upper Texas coast make Harvey the wettest tropical cyclone on record in the US.

In Texas, the storm displaced more than 40,000 people, damaged hundreds of thou-

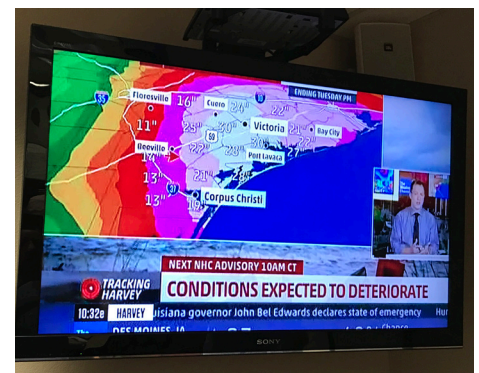
sands of buildings and threatened operations at dozens of CID and Parole Division facilities along its path.

TDCJ has the benefit of experience dealing with weather disasters, including other strong hurricanes such as Rita in 2005 and Ike in 2008. The agency carefully studies its response to such disasters, creates or revises preparedness plans, and organizes response exercises to help all staff understand their role during an emergency. A well-timed emergency management simulation exercise, which simulated a Category 4 hurricane striking the Gulf Coast, took place only days before severe flooding overwhelmed the Brazos River Basin during the Memorial Day floods of 2016. In that case, the training exercise helped TDCJ's many divisions and departments work together to manage the emergency. And while institutional experience and effective training are important parts of the agency's disaster response preparations, TDCJ relies on the professional commitment and perseverance of its workforce to fulfill its mission despite the devastating effects of these natural disasters.

Harvey began on August 13, first as a tropical wave off the African coast, then growing into a tropical storm four days later. After entering the Caribbean the storm gained strength as it continued moving north-northwest. On August 23 Harvey was predicted to make

landfall within 72 hours as a tropical storm or Category 1 hurricane, and the National Weather Service issued storm surge, tropical storm and hurricane watches for most of the Texas Gulf Coast; these watches turned into warnings as the storm suddenly intensified, producing the first major hurricane of the season. Late on August 25, Harvey had grown to a Category 4 hurricane with sustained winds of more than 130 mph.

TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier described agency preparations for the approaching storm, "As Hurricane Harvey developed in the Gulf, moving from a trop-



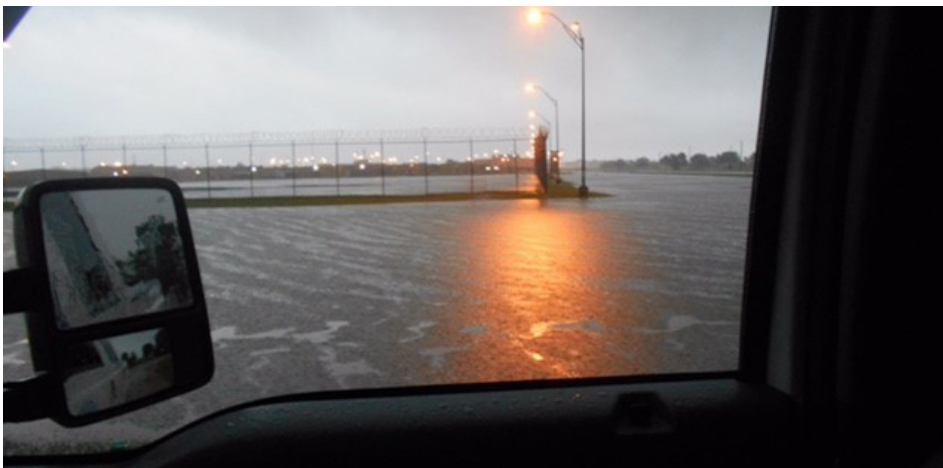
Conditions worsened quickly as Hurricane Harvey approached the Texas coast.

ical depression to a Category 4 hurricane in record time, our agency command center began 24-hour operations and staff began making preparations by increasing fuel, food and water supplies to units in the potential impact area, and also staging resources such as buses and staff near impact areas to as-

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sist, if needed. Prior to landfall we evacuated community treatment centers in Victoria and Corpus Christi, and also evacuated high-risk parolees who were living in impact areas who did not have other residential options.”

Harvey made landfall around 10:00 p.m. on August 25 near Rockport. Here it stalled, producing rainfall totals never before measured in the continental United States. Within hours, more than 20 inches of rain had fallen in the Corpus Christi metropolitan area and parts of Houston received at least 30 inches. Large areas along the coast lost both power and water service.



Flooding along the perimeter of the Jester I Unit.

Collier also explained how the agency staff and emergency responders around the state were kept informed of the storm's progress. “As the storm made landfall, our team closely monitored all of our operational areas to ensure needs were being met, but we also were in regular contact with the State Operations Center. We monitored daily conference calls with the SOC and state hydrologist which helped us forecast possible flooding near many of our facilities.”

TDCJ's emergency command center coordinated administrative, operational, and communications tasks to address the changing

circumstances of the storm. Evacuations were ordered to ensure the safety of staff and offenders. “Based upon the information we received, we evacuated the Ramsey, Stringfellow and Terrell units as the Brazos River was expected to rise above levels at the end of 2016 when we had floods,” said Collier. “We also evacuated the Jester I and the Vance units, when the state hydrologist advised that the Brazos River near Sugar Land would exceed its banks. As the storm continued, we evacuated halfway-houses and treatment centers in Houston and Beaumont. Overall, we evacuated nearly 7,000 offenders, most of whom were housed in TDCJ correctional

facilities in south and east Texas, until their unit or facility was ready to be reoccupied after the storm.”

Hurricane warnings were discontinued as Harvey moved over land and weakened, but were reissued as the storm moved back out over the Gulf of Mexico. By August 28, a tropical storm warning was again in effect for the entire Gulf Coast of Texas, from High Island northward. The storm strengthened again before making a third and final landfall in Louisiana on August 29, inundating Beaumont-Port Arthur with 32 inches of rain, flooding the Neches River and cutting off the

city's water supply. Executive Director Collier explained how advance planning helped the agency avoid a water-supply problem. “For the units in the impact areas that sheltered-in-place during the storm it was largely business as usual, with the exception of units in the Beaumont area who lost water service when the City of Beaumont water supply was affected by flooding. Fortunately, due to our preparations, we had water tankers with portable water onsite, porta-potties at those locations, as well as a robust supply of bottled water.”

Immediately after the storm, agency leadership teams went to each of the impacted facilities to help assess damage and to address any concerns expressed by staff and offenders. In areas where the storm hit hardest, many employees stayed on their units, working and sleeping onsite to ensure each facility had adequate staff on hand. After the storm had passed, staff members from areas unaffected by the storm were brought in to relieve employees who had spent days working on storm-hit units. Harvey then drifted inland, weakening and dissipating on September 3.

Before it was over, Harvey had caused at least 88 deaths in Texas. Governor Greg Abbott declared a state of emergency for 50 counties, with six entire counties and parts of others under mandatory evacuation. An estimated 450 square miles of Harris County were under water and more than 300,000 Texans were without electricity. In Texas, financial losses due to property damage and lost production are estimated to exceed \$150 billion.

The hard work and professional commitment demonstrated by TDCJ employees kept losses due to Hurricane Harvey at a minimum, while offender oversight was maintained, and public safety preserved. As of mid-October

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ber, offenders evacuated by TDCJ had been returned to their assigned facilities, damage assessments were complete, and structural repairs were in progress, with an estimated cost of less than the \$1 million.

Even before the flood waters had receded, the department was receiving calls and emails from individuals, businesses, organizations and correctional agencies from across the nation asking how they could help. The Association of State Correctional Administrators, the Correctional Peace Officers Foundation, the Texas Correctional Association and state corrections departments in Ohio, Indiana, Pennsylvania, and Kentucky were among the organizations that offered assistance. TDCJ staff also donated much-needed supplies and funding to support recovery.

The urge to help even included offenders incarcerated within TDCJ who donated more than \$53,000 in commissary funds to the American Red Cross. Offenders requested and were granted permission to donate to the Red Cross after Hurricane Katrina in 2005 when they donated almost \$44,000 to the organization.

Looking back on the event, Collier expressed his thoughts on the performance of agency employees, saying “There’s so much that our agency did each and every day to stay one step ahead of a very unpredictable situation, it’s hard to put all that into words and explain it to you. What I do want to tell you is that each piece of this operation was complicated.”

Collier continued, “The preparations, the evacuations, the housing of evacuated offenders, staff who remained onsite with offenders, staff who provided relief, staff who kept generators running and water being delivered, hours without rest, yet focused on getting the job done. Our correctional of-

ficers, our parole officers, our clerical staff, division directors and everybody in between did a phenomenal, heroic job. They all ensured that our offenders and staff were safe and that we delivered on our promise to provide public safety at all times. I could not be prouder of the team that we have at this agency and just remain in awe of the amazing things they do so well.”

Natural disasters on the scale of Hurricane Harvey are, thankfully, very rare. TDCJ staff responded to this unprecedented storm event with hard work and professional commitment which kept losses to a minimum, while offender oversight was maintained, and public safety preserved. Fortunately, response planning and training programs, reinforced by practical exercises, provided critical support during this disaster response, though most of the credit for TDCJ’s success dealing with a direct hit from a record-breaking major hurricane must be awarded to its frontline workforce, whose professional commitment never wavered during the storm.

Planning, preparation and response

The Office of Incident Management (OIM), which began monitoring Harvey’s approach on August 18, is the agency’s central oversight authority for emergency management preparedness and response. The OIM helps develop and update emergency response and continuity of operations plans, and coordinates logistical and law enforcement support for the State Emergency Management Plan for the use of various transportation assets, including those of other state agencies, during an emergency. The OIM also trains agency staff on roles and expectations during emergencies and, in conjunction with agency divisions and departments, coordinates training for security staff and unit personnel

on the Incident Command System. For details about OIM activities before, during and after Hurricane Harvey, go to the Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Office of Incident Management article in this issue of *Connections* newsletter.

Preparation and response activities are largely overseen by the agency’s Correctional Institutions; Parole; Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics; and Facilities divisions, with other agency divisions, departments and sections providing critical support.

Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Correctional Institutions Division explains how CID kept offenders under secure supervision while preparing for the hurricane, and during shelter-in-place, evacuation and repopulation activities. How frontline unit staff rode out



TDCJ Executive Director Bryan Collier surveys the flooding at the Ramsey Unit following Hurricane Harvey.

the storm, and what was done to expedite a return to normal operations are also discussed.

Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Parole Division describes how parole supervision was maintained despite the closure of district offices

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due to flooding and storm damage, and how Parole staff worked with parolees to secure home plans or return them to their facilities as they became available.

Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Manufacturing, Agribusiness and Logistics recounts the many challenges which had to be overcome to prepare for a hurricane and continue delivery of critical provisions to facilities scattered across hundreds of square miles, over roadways covered with water and debris.

Hurricane Harvey: Inside the Facilities Division details how dozens of secure facilities, offices and other infrastructure items are prepared to withstand strong winds and flooding rains, how units were cleaned of debris, and how damages were quickly and efficiently assessed and repaired.

While these divisions handled most emergency response activities during the storm, many other groups within TDCJ worked in coordinated support.

Five high-profile vehicles designed for mobility in rough road conditions were procured by TDCJ's Office of the Inspector General and used to transport employees, monitor roads for flooding and make damage assessments. OIG officers also assisted some municipalities who needed and requested security help during the storm.

The Private Facilities Contract Monitoring/Oversight Division evacuated and repopulated several contract residential facilities, including a Houston halfway house, which had been isolated by floodwaters. The Community Justice Assistance Division operated an offender hotline to help coordinate offender



One of the five high-profile vehicles procured by OIG to help with transport through flood waters.

services, issued weather and facility status updates, and compiled reports to comply with the Federal Emergency Management Act.

The agency's Health Services Division worked to continue provision of appropriate medical care, and the agency's Reentry and Integration Division assisted with the evacuation of parole and probation clients from contracted facilities, and continued working with those clients while they remained at their alternate locations. During this time, RID continued providing for offenders' needs by finding residence options, potential employment opportunities, and other reentry resources, and coordinated with the Parole and Correctional Institutions divisions to continue offender release operations while keeping offender families informed about release plans for their family members. RID also worked to help ensure the safety of offenders whose release plan involved travel to a storm-affected area.

The agency's Information Technology Division and CID Support Operations worked to maintain telephone service and to keep computer networks, including the TDCJ Main-frame, in operation. The Public Information Office posted regular updates on the agency's website, Facebook and Twitter pages, and TDCJ staff provided the Board of Criminal Justice and various state officials with daily updates.

The agency's Human Resources Division set up an employee assistance hotline to assist employees who had been affected by the storm and the TDCJ Ombudsman answered questions from concerned family and friends about the location and safety of their offender. A conference call with organizations representing offender families also helped address questions concerning their loved ones. ▲

To learn how you can help victims of Hurricane Harvey or if you were affected by the storm and need assistance, go to the Texas Hurricane Center website for more information.

<https://gov.texas.gov/hurricane>